Introduction

The Boundless Sea 沖廣: Self and History, the final installment of my trilogy on space / time, follows in the wake of Island World (2008) and Pineapple Culture (2009), all published with my great gratitude by the University of California Press and editor Niels Hooper.¹ Unlike the expanding spaces of islands and continents of Island World and the tropical and temperate zones of Pineapple Culture, The Boundless Sea is a spatial collapse into the subject-self, but also about the writing of history and history’s subjects, capacious quarters to be sure.

The trilogy, in its consideration of space / time, writes against normative, natural distinctions between space and time and assumptions such as the linear march of time from the past to the present and future orchestrated by periodization and the narrative form, and the management of discrete spaces, including nations, continents, and world regions. That ordering of space / time as a flexing of power is an imperial exercise and is foundational to the social sciences broadly and to history peculiarly. I explore that contention in the first two volumes, and continue that interrogation in this, the third.

At stake here is the power to name, classify, assign attributes, and rank, arising from the binary and hence hierarchical relations of the self as set against its other. Although mutually constituted and constituting, the immediate, manly continental self positions itself against its remote,
feminine island other, while the civilized, manly, temperate race measures itself against its figured savage, feminine, tropical racialized others. Geographical and biological determinisms underwrite both the myth of continents and races, genders, and sexualities while imperialism and colonization, aspects of nationalism and capitalism, animate those discourses, materializing fictions of the mind.

HISTORICAL FORMATION

Historical formation and, in this volume, the memoir form are the methods by which I transgress the conventions and disciplines of history’s time and space. I conceive of historical formations as space/time, indeterminate, simultaneous and expansive, in process and relational, as oral history or conversations between speaker and listener, author and reader, and as poetics and the spoken word, “talk story,” rather than the penned narrative form.

Subject-position is critical in that mobile exchange, the distinction between voicing and hearing is blurred, authorship is suspect, and meanings not structures comprise the memorable and important. The formation is visually a montage, conversationally, an ensemble of discrete utterances particular to place and time, and discursively, a dialogical engagement and a moving conversation back and forth, side by side. It is important to note that this history, then, is a formation or a structure and a process, namely forms and relations in the making.

Historical formations, moreover, are like certain forms of women’s self-writing, including testimonios, which are often told in relation to others and are introspective, nonlinear, and fragmented, a performance at odds with imperial dictations of authority and order from apparent lawless disorder. At the same time, women’s accounts as well as testimonies of silenced and marginalized individuals and groups are emphatic presences when seen against their spectral absences in the world of letters and the public sphere, and they can speak against subjection within the discursive sites of power.
In those senses, as a literary form and an intervention in power and its manifestations, I deploy memoir and the imagination to situate my subject-self and history.

Moreover, like new historicism that blurs the distinction between the literary and nonliterary, experience (discourse) and the archive (the material), my use of memoir and the imagination arises from my belief that fiction and nonfiction, the subjective and objective, memoir and history are borderless and, in fact, history is memoir insofar as the historian’s shadow lurks behind history’s texts and memoir is history. Similarly, the body and mind, female and male, experience and theory binaries are false, because they are relational and mutually constituted, constituting. Phenomenology’s experience is a way of knowing, an epistemology of the body as well as the mind.

The centrality of language and ideology—discourse—must not be missed in this, my consideration of my subject-self and my life’s work. Although the subject cannot simply be a variant of discourse, as Michel Foucault suggests, subjectivities are interpellations of discourse. History’s narrative form emerges from those strictures of language and ideology. In resistance, like Julia Kristeva’s escape from Lacanian phallocentrism, I employ poetry and prosody, not as a prior, primordial condition but as a potential path to greater freedoms. The semiotic is multivocal and disrupts the symbolic, as Kristeva points out, and rhythm, stress, pitch, intonation, and acoustic qualities defy encoding by vocabulary and grammar. As conversations, talk story and oral history can intervene in imperial history and restore a measure of dignity to the oppressed, “the wretched of the earth,” my discursive communities.

Contradictions abound. Despite my claim to orality, this text appears in written form. My method of writing, nonetheless, involves multiple oral readings of my words. I write; then, I vocalize. I listen and rewrite. I must hear my words to feel their cadence and timbre, their song. I repeat the
process, again and again, day after day. In that sense, this text, though a writing, is also a voicing not unlike my hearing of music, sounds produced and consumed by human bodies. Before language, I felt the music’s pulsating beats; before speech, I learned its meanings.

I realize that my use of tenses—past, present, and future—endorses a language of time. While writing against a linear construction of time, I deploy its language. I understand that those who subscribe to the reality of the past, present, and future might see them as temporal dimensions with nonrelational properties that change with the passage of time, which is essentially a spatial construct. By contrast, I conceive of time as tenseless, despite my use of tenses, and conceive of space/time as relational and indeterminate, quantum approximations. In addition, while I write in the present, I agree with the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s critique of that privileging of the here and now, and aspire to direct temporality toward the unattainable, unknowable future.

Watching Japanese television in Tokyo during the summer of 2008, my wife, Marina, and I witnessed the unfolding of time/space. In what the show’s producers called a “simulcast,” interviewers in Japan questioned Japanese residents in Brazil on the one-hundredth anniversary of Japanese migration to Brazil. Space was made manifest through presence, the materiality of Japan and Brazil, and time was evident in the understanding that the evening show in Japan featured Brazilians who were up early in the morning to appear on the program. Their bleary eyes and throaty voices testified to that time difference. Space was apprehended through time in that there were pregnant pauses between the questions asked in Japan and the answers given in Brazil. The microseconds required between question and answer told us there was distance involved. That commonsense, seamless connection between space and time in our everyday experience points to the mutually constituting and relational aspects of space/time.
THE HISTORIAN

I recognize voicing or writing oneself into history, whether as memoir or testimonio, can devolve into a whine or a boast. Moreover, self-writing can be of little moment to others. Herein, thus, I consider my subject-self in relation to my others and not as humanism’s solitary, preeminent “I am.” Additionally, my choice of stories and my telling of them reveal as much about those histories as about the historian. Despite denials to the contrary, histories bear the imprint of the historian located in space/time. In that sense, history is autobiography, and autobiography is history. To navigate your way through The Boundless Sea, thus, consider this intellectual autobiography of who I think I am at this writing.

Nearly forty years ago, I began to reflect on and direct my life of labor. Books were traces of presence, I believed. Ever since graduate school, I loved roaming the bookshelves of research libraries in search of titles that intrigued me. Drawn was I to old, dusty covers that were never checked out. For fifty or more years, I’d marvel, no human eyes danced across these pages. Eureka! I’d exclaim, I’ve discovered and revived this author and text. They came to life anew through my magical powers. The uncanny. Incantations.

In the quiet of the morning, I’d sit with my coffee contemplating my life’s work. For years, it was a delicious daily observance. If we can assume a productive professional life of forty years, if lucky, and five to seven years for the completion of a single book, eight titles were the totality of that lifetime, a humbling figure and acknowledgment. To start, I settled on the subject of resistance as my unique contribution to scholarship. The theme of resistance came from African history wherein resistance signified both centering Africans and recognizing their agency, their ability of make history.

My graduate education was a product of my times—the late 1960s—that for me involved prominently Viet Nam and black power. I decided on my specialization, African history, before the founding of Asian American studies, and I left for a three-year sojourn in southern Africa during the formative years of
ethnic studies, from 1968 to 1971. When I returned to resume my graduate
studies, UCLA’s Asian American Studies Center had just begun, and I joined
the first cohort of graduate students in Asian American studies in the country.
My graduate training was principally in African history, southern Africa in
particular, but I also read in US labor and African American history, and my
minor areas extended to historical linguistics and economic anthropology.

Although unclear to me at the time, my graduate education that appeared
to be hopelessly disparate cohered through a particular logic. The received
paradigm of Eurocentrism dominated both fields of study—African and US
history. Deeds of European people, especially “great men,” loomed large on
those paradigmatic historical landscapes, and periodization and historical
activity pivoted upon the articulation of Europeans with non-Europeans. In
fact, before Europe, according to some ardent defenders of the faith, there
was no history, only the “unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in pic-
turesque but irrelevant corners of the globe,” in the choice words of British
imperial historian Hugh Trevor-Roper.

Pivoting on the European, African history is periodized as precolonial,
colonial, and independent (postcolonial) Africa, and Asian American his-
tory as immigration, contact and interaction, competition and conflict, and
inclusion. The first systematic studies of Africa were by anthropologists as
specialists of primitive peoples and not sociologists or political scientists
who studied advanced societies, and thus reflective of a racist division of
intellectual labor. The science of primordial humanity was an imperial
project by naming, classifying, describing, and ranking peoples and socie-
ties as measured against their unnamed subject-selves. Likewise, US (Chi-
cago) sociology viewed Asians as a nuisance to the majority group—styled
“the Oriental problem”—insofar as the racialized markings of Asians (and
Africans) resisted easy erasure and absorption through cultural assimilation.
For those consensus scholars, homogeneity delimited the parameters of the
national identity whereas diversity threatened its integrity.
The post–World War II anticolonial, antiracist struggles of the Third World paralleled and intersected with the domestic US aspirations for self-determination. Those, of course, were merely the modern phases of some four hundred years of contestations over imperialism and colonialism as discourse and material relations, but they informed my consciousness and identifications. Carter Woodson lamented the “mis-education of the Negro” in 1933, and Cheik Anta Diop in his *Nation negres et cultur* published in 1954 scored the “colonial mentality” of French assimilation and advanced an African history and culture. At the 1965 International Congress of African Historians held significantly in Dar es Salaam, Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere acknowledged the contributions of non-African scholars, but expressed the ardent desire of Africans to represent and understand themselves for their national development.

Three years later, Terence Ranger, historian of Africa and a leading figure in the “Dar es Salaam school,” insisted on the primacy of African agency conceptualized as resistance and its links between proto-nationalist and nationalist movements. In that same year in the fall of 1968, students at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley formed the Third World Liberation Front and demanded, among other things, a curriculum and pedagogy for liberation. They conceived of themselves as members of the Third World insurgent masses enjoined in the historic global resistance struggles of anticolonialism and antiracism.

I am a child of that intellectual ferment and coupling. I emerge from that convergence of Afrocentrism (in the way I describe it above, not in its present US parlance) and Third World studies. I am a conflict, not a consensus, historian. I see consensus as a variety of functionalism and, as such, incapable of explaining change. I prefer analysis to description, and look for patterns that help to explain the social and historical formations. I foreground individuals, but simultaneously situate them within their wider social contexts, especially within the means and relations of production. But I am not a
structuralist, and although I rely upon theory to frame and explain history, I insist upon evidence, including experience, to sustain the argument.

I harbor romantic notions about the masses and ordinary people, but I also recognize the limits of historical and social consciousness and their efficacy and am impressed with the power and ubiquity of oppression and the ingenuity of the ruling classes to change the forms and contents of control and exploitation. I am by sentiment and conviction a historical materialist insofar as I see the provisioning function and the means and relations of production as foundational, but I do not hold an overdetermined notion of class relations or see the formations of race, gender, and sexuality as false consciousness or mystification. I subscribe to the theory of social formation that is inclusive of material production that interpellates and is constituted by the social constructions and manifestations of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.

And finally, in terms of explanation, I employ the dialogical relations of oppression and exploitation and resistance, or the curtailment of agency and the expropriation of land and labor against the ideas and deeds of subordinate classes directed at their liberation. The model is historical in that it accommodates movement and change and is not a closed or equilibrating system; it endows the oppressed and exploited agency while taking seriously structured relations of dependency; it distinguishes, in conflict terms, the histories of majorities from minorities (defined by power, not numbers) and connects the histories of the oppressed—African, Asian, and Native Americans, Latinxs, women, queers, workers, and aliens (documented and undocumented); and it is rooted in historical materialism and social formation.

In sum, I approach my life’s work—African history and Asian American and Third World studies—in much the same way. I seek to recover pasts that have been neglected and distorted, articulate them from the perspectives of the oppressed for the purposes of accuracy but also for their empowerment. In turn, those theoretical and political positions have bearings upon my
methodologies. To recuperate the consciousness and acts of people not inclined to leave written records, to give voice to voices unheard, I rely on oral history and the imagination and experience. Still, I agree with the historian Joan Scott’s criticism of privileging experience over theory, and reject unproblematized, uncontested renderings of experience. And while I believe in self-representation, I endorse the argument by philosopher Linda Alcoff that we, scholars, can and must speak for others, our subjects.10 Those influences, I surmise, you will find in my work.

*The Boundless Sea* is likely the last book on my list. After thirteen (not eight) titles, I have come to the end of my life’s work. The prospect frightens and confuses. My discipline, which required four hours each day save Sunday for writing, was my life, my passion. My mother died mere weeks short of her 101st year, but to me she died years before her body expired. She existed, not lived, waiting, waiting for her final rest. Most of her hours she spent in bed, dreaming of the world to be. In death, she has been resurrected to her former self, her truer self, I know, and she lives in my writings and in your readings.

**THE SUBJECTS**

*The Boundless Sea* is a memoir and history and the writing of history. The subject-self and historiography, accordingly, are the subjects of this my final work. The book is divided into two parts: Part One, Subject-Self, represents the historian through his maternal grandmother, obāban, chapter 1; his mother, okāsan, chapter 2; and his father, otōsan, chapter 3. Part Two, Subjects, draws from the historian’s lifetime of labor, including his first major project and a work begun but not completed: Tule Lake, chapter 4; Third World studies, chapter 5; Botswana, chapter 6; and History, chapter 7. A brief word about the subjects: Tule Lake began as a book-length study to build on my earlier work on religion and resistance at that concentration camp;11 Third World studies was originally researched and written for this book but

Chapter 1, “Black Stream,” a current of life, is obāban, my maternal grandmother and a central founding figure in my subjectivity. Okinawa Island is the site of my origins and thus ancestral devotions. The Ryūkyūs, reviled by some Japanese writers as “South Sea Islands” and its people as “Japan kanakas,” instead insightfully offer scant comfort amidst shifting grounds, restless seas, and plentiful transplantations, in timeless constancy denying a permanent sense of place. That condition recalls the astute observation of the twelfth-century monk Hugo of St. Victor, cited in my *Island World*: “The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place.”

“Self,” chapter 2, is my mother, okāsan, another mainstay of my subject-self. Herein I recount coming of age on a sugar plantation in Hawai‘i, and trace the primary source of my education to plantation pedagogy. Cane fields foreshortened my range of vision, and the plantation’s relations of production located my subject-position within their hierarchies of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nation. Escape from the mundane testified to the efficacy of historical agency, while mis-education cultivated a colonial mentality, which enervated and dulled a critical consciousness. Large-scale land expropriation from native people and migrant laborers, mainly people of color, enabled the imperial plantation, which was a prominent feature of global capitalism’s career and spread. I am a member of that community of plantation laborers who once circled the earth’s tropical band. Plantation pedagogy produces the subject I think I am, and interpel-lates, in resistance, my affiliations and identifications.

My father, otōsan, is the subject of chapter 3 in his various, changing forms, bodies (kino lau). “Naturalizations” name the processes by which
migrating species become native, aliens become citizens. Some 30 million years ago, terrestrial biota traveled the currents of air and water from Asia and America to Pele’s creation mid-Pacific. Having survived that immense crossing against incredible odds failed to ensure the naturalization of those life forms on islands where additional challenges awaited them. People of color, like my father’s parents, found fields poisoned by white supremacy. From 1790 to 1952, naturalization in the United States was restricted to “free white persons,” while in Hawai‘i by contrast, Hi‘iaka’s gentle, healing touch moderated Pele’s fires and nudged algae, mosses, ferns, and lichens to spread and thrive over the cooling lava.

“Extinctions,” chapter 4, centers on the watered, fertile Tule Lake Basin, which was a place of life abundant and a terminus and killing ground, testing the wills of people for their right to exist. On the northeastern side of the life-giving waters rose a concentration camp for Japanese Americans, and on the lake’s southwestern shore flowed the Lava Beds where Kintpuash and his Modoc band waged a war of survival against the depredations of white settlers and the US Army. There, in the abandoned and littered sites of cultural and physical extinction, I saw the ghosts of my ancestors consorting with the spirits of their forebears, American Indians, in the nearby lava fields, which comprise a segment of the “ring of fire” that connects America with Asia.

Chapter 5, “Third World,” opens with “the problem of the twentieth century,” the creation of the global color line as was first articulated by the African American scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois. Colonialism, or the exploitation of the lands and peoples of the “darker races” justified by the discourses of religion and science, produced European empires and their counter, Third World poverty and movements for self-determination and antiracism. Anticolonial intellectuals like Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi denounced the erasure of the colonized from history, and they urged the restoration of “a whole and free man” and “a new humanity—a new humanism.” Within that context, students of the Third World Liberation Front
(TWLF) at San Francisco State enjoined that Third World revolution. “Our goal is Third World Power,” they declared. “Our essence is a New World Consciousness of oppressed peoples.” The TWLF’s demand for liberation comprises my generation’s cause and directs my intellectual and political labors.

“Antipodes,” chapter 6, reflects upon the geographical alignment of Hawai‘i, the tropical islands of my physical birth, with Botswana, the land-locked, largely desert nation of my intellectual genesis. That apparent spatial opposition reflected the contrasting notions of history held by my Western-educated self and my African teachers who labored to free me from my imperious project, an economic history of the people who dance to the crocodile (ba bina kwena). Moving from island to continent, the northern to southern hemisphere required a radical recalibration of my space / time and a thorough unlearning of history and my assumptions of self and society. Only then was I afforded a fleeting glimpse of the time / space of my African other.

My world, my subject-self and subjects, begins along the imaginary color line marking the edges of the tropical and temperate zones, the Tropic of Cancer to the equator’s north and the Tropic of Capricorn to its south. Cutting across the Ryūkyū chain and the Hawaiian archipelago, the Tropic of Cancer marks the sun’s zenith north while its southern reach, the Tropic of Capricorn, meanders through Botswana. Those latitudes locate dividing lines and shared spaces that are relationally dependent, and they mark my subject-positions, liminally and multiply situated, emerging from islands and continents in the tropical and temperate zones.

“History,” the final chapter, reflects upon the writing of the subject-self into history and, therewith, society and the choices made in that assignment and articulation. Moreover, I have chosen to posit and advance the idea of historical formation by deconstructing the polarities of space and time, islands and continents, tropical and temperate zones, historian and historical subjects, together with the binaries of race, gender, sexuality, class, and
nation. Those projects, my life’s work, arise from my antipathy toward a plantation and colonial education and mentality and their oppressive designs. More discretely, I refuse history’s disciplining of its wonderfully perverse and intractable subjects, humans—“the oppressed”—with the power to liberate themselves through a poetics of time / space.¹²